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LETTERS EAST

A. PERCY BROWN



LETTERS EAST

...BY...

A. PERCY BROWN

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DEDICATION.

TO HER

Who is the "boys best
friend," and

TO HIM

For whom, with every
man, the best appreciation
ever increases with the
ripening of the years.

INTRODUCTION.

It has often been the burden and is ever the graciousness of one's own people to bear with shortcomings too grievous for others; in this case, the task of the following pages might be more than could be borne, were it not for the mythical character of those who endure.

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Looking From A Granary.



HOME, FEB. 1, 1903.

My dear Uncle Fred and
Aunt Nellie :

I have written you so often it is hard to tell when I last wrote; it was, at least, a year ago, was it not?

You see, since Aunt Kit came to California, it has taken me all the time to look after my extensive

household affairs; it has taken her very much of the time, also; therefore, it would seem that house-keeping has not been misrepresented by bachelors, as to its capacious places for hiding innumerable spare hours, half days, periodical moments—otherwise devoted to rest and leisure—with every now and then a whole day deliberately and consciencelessly taken, in the interests of some long neglected trifle, a needy petty convenience or two, or a real but inopportune illustration of some of life's inalienable rights.

Briefly, this must be why I have found so much time to write.

We are having the win-

ter rains; they usually court the good will of the farmers, every now and then, from November to April.

The rains are the barometer of California hopes and prosperity; which is one of the few things wherein every other place I know of is so much like California.

It is particularly muddy here, sometimes, during a part of the Eastern sleighing season. When the sun shines for a time, however, the mud spares no effort to get out of sight quickly. The sun in this climate acts on the face of the earth like a thirsty sponge on a cup of water.

When the water is no more, for seven months, the cup gets dry and dryer, and

soon begins to crack and warp, is rapidly and repeatedly covered with dust, and, to the inexperienced eye, appears, certainly, to have no glad future; but it is revived by the heavy dews, nightly, so, when the summer has passed, and trees that have the habits of the East have shed their bright patches of Autumn color, the dry cup is filled by the early November rains, and Nature soon enters upon her Thanksgiving of gentle showers, with the brightest and clearest of greens.

One's heart turns to thankfulness in a beautiful valley where the mountains seem but a few miles away, and the sea, too, is not far. Those beautiful blue masses

of form and color, spotted, here and there, with snow, are unspeakably fascinating.

Today, it seems as though the whole range were many miles away—forty, and as many more; tomorrow, the soft blue and patches of white will seem scarcely beyond a neighbor's place. The sun before rising lends the lower ranges enough light for the deepest of marine blues. Such a blue as one struggles to make forever one's own, to take into one's innermost depths of lasting realization. And this deep dawn color, so solid, so real, has, between it and you, low banks and marshes of mist, silently and softly changing outline, as the sun draws near and

over the horizon, and, finally melting away in the beginning of the day. One leaves one's window reluctantly, for, after breakfast, all will be gone; and the day, that will have come, will be going on—like all other days—beautiful, but with its morning passed—morning in the charm of its clear, brief hour without a sun. And this bothers one so, too, to tell which is the more charming, the swiftly passing part of an hour, just before sunrise, or the one just after. The mountains ought to be excused from any blame in this matter; for the same difficulty awaits one in the quiet valley of the Platte, where the river has yet

some four score of miles and more to run before it meets the ochre stream that comes down from the great, roomy Northwest. Or, if one stand on an elevation, a little back from the shore, on old Cape Cod, Nantucket side, the difficulty is here. Even if one give way to one of the real temptations of life, and roll away to the Southland, where the air is so soft, the moonlight so mellow, and the roses, opening liberally, are an enchantment of color in the heaviest of morning dew, the question is not evaded, perhaps —perhaps, because the hour after sunrise, in the Southland, is, certainly, a spell of delight.

But the day that has be-

gun goes on; and, it is well, for would it not be a most unwelcome task to go about one's work in a day that were like either the half hour before sunrise, or, the one after. How could one set about material things in a day of such charms.

It has been said that there are not many pretty drives about a town which lies in the center of this agricultural portion of the Valley; and it is not meet for one who is not native to a place, by many summers, to dispute the serious word of those who have watched the sun set over the Coast Range for many years. Nevertheless, one is constrained to be true to one's self, even if others have

the weight of conventional authority on their side. It is better to be true to one's own conscientious misconceptions, and, thereby, come, perhaps, to the truth, surely, though tardily, than to take the word of one's neighbor, whose experience helps him to know, but does not necessarily bring conviction to another. Therefore, one must be excused for thinking that there are, at least in one season, several beautiful driveways or roads in this particular section of equable territory, and, many pleasing features within a step of the carriage and out under the horizon. It is true that there may be more of the latter. There is an old chip off the block of

wisdom of some ancient, about distance and enchantment; it may not apply here; though, often, one is inclined to think that it does; but it is so hard to be certain about things, anywhere, anyway, and in California, particularly, where there are so many almost perfectly developed mirages.

The mirage, by the way, in California, is not a creature of the far distant horizon, on particularly favorable days. It is a much bolder illusion, yet, truly Western in its habits, appearing at almost any time, during the Spring or Summer, whiling away the hazy hours of the live-

long day in making * stretches of burnt prairie out of a recently ploughed field, putting in a slough or pond, here and there, around which the fire has run, and leaving the smouldering ridges and tufts of still smoking grass scattered over the blackened waste, just as one sees it on a rolling middle Western prairie, when the racing head flame has passed over the crest of the hill, and the ashes are still so warm as to make one's hardy Indian pony refuse to travel

* One day, in the month of May or June, I was driving along under a burning sky, although not an unpleasant one, when I saw, in the near distance, over an area of great extent, what appeared to be the smouldering track of a prairie fire. The flames appeared to have just passed over the ground, skipping little spots, now and then; in some places there seemed to be distinct little marshes or lagoons, which the fire, of course, had

across the slope that, a few minutes before, was a field of waving brown and purple. When the mirage is not occupied with this sort of amusement it may be engaged in deluging a rancher's building premises, leaving just room for the larger structures to stand out of water, with an appearance of good approaches to the hay or straw stacks by the Venetian method.

Though the length and quality of this letter be an affliction, Uncle Fred and Aunt Nellie, the perpetrat-

to go around; and here and there, a few buildings loomed up hazily, out of the smoke rift and brown marsh lands. Knowing that I was in a country where Nature spares no pains to be remarkably deceptive, I was considerably interested to see how consciously and forcibly I was compelled to bring before my attention the fact that this was only a California mirage, in one of her great valleys, during the dry season.

or still has the temerity to
wish to remain,

Affectionately your
Nephew.

It was not until I had driven almost alongside the border lines of this mirage, that the true conditions revealed themselves plainly. A freshly plowed field was the background for the burnt prairie surface; variation in the contour of the land, some large buildings, and the atmospheric conditions did the rest. I presume that one thing that caused this picture to be remarkably real was that the smoking track of a prairie fire, especially if seen under circumstances of more or less excitement, as such fires were to be seen over the broad prairies of the Middle West, a generation ago. leaves an impression that is not soon effaced from the mind. At any rate, this water and smoke deception does not call upon the imagination to fill out the picture in any way. If one recall the perfect summer days on the South Shore of Massachusetts, opposite Martha's Vineyard, with the line of tall-masted schooners drifting lazily along, far out in the channel, under the horizon, it is a pleasant reminder of these fading Eastern memories to see, on the outskirts of the continent, this fine water deception of the California mirage.

HOME, MAY 6, 1903.
My dear Aunt Alice and
Uncle William:

Once in a while one goes driving; some people go oftener. One of the most pleasing things about the country drives of California is that the tree trunks are so richly covered with lichens, owing, partly, I suppose, to the large amount of moisture in the atmosphere, for so many months in the year. This growth is very rich in strong browns, yellows, grays, and the softer tints of light

blue. For a time, I believe, these small plant folk were not considered to belong to the true Lichen family; but, if I am not mistaken, one of the most recent of the German authorities places the beautiful parasites among the true Lichens.

One cannot help feeling, in driving over the hills of New England, or across the fertile fields of the Middle West, that nature has a great variation in her capacity for presenting a diversity of scene. A New England or Middle Western winter is certainly a very different picture from a mid-summer scene in the same locality. I suppose that it has been a common

amusement for the youth of many lands, on scorching harvest days, to try and picture to themselves a winter day, from the memories of the past season, behind the real summer scene, as it were, with its intensely hot sun and sweltering atmosphere. In some places it would seem that the imagination might need to be quite strong and persistent to get any clear impression of a rigorous winter day and a hot mid-summer day, in the same half hour. In California, however, the task may be easier than elsewhere. The residents say that the seasons are so badly mixed that they do not know themselves apart, anyway; it is really true

that the characteristics, respectively, of winter and summer are so different from what they are in other climates that Nature is given the appearance of having got in a hurry, or having become a trifle careless or indifferent as to her climatic distinctions. For instance, it takes a very hard frost, and a protracted one, to lay the little violets low; as for the grass, through the cold mid-winter nights, hard frosts seem to have very little effect upon it. Undoubtedly, the thousands of cattle that graze in the luxuriant valleys sometimes feel very chilly, especially during the rainy season; but their backs are not covered with snow, or icicles

do not hang from their sides, for days at a time, which, often, is a part of the winter decoration of their less fortunate fellow creatures of the Middle West.

It is human nature to come to think that the change of the seasons is a part of the very fabric of creation; and humanity is very much a servant of habit; thus, at first, it is not a little incident, in one's observation, to see, during the winter months, hundreds and thousands of acres of waving grass, dotted, sometimes, very perceptibly with the well satisfied herds.

The contrast of this can be easily realized, if, on an August day, one goes into

the open, and sees stretching about him, almost like a sea, the heat waves of a temperature that is running from 100° to 115° , Fahrenheit, or higher, under a cloudless sky. The grass is a light brown; the horizon is an unbroken bank of haze; the grazing herds stand motionless, and appear, through the oven-like atmosphere, like phantom creatures, abiding their hour. I was driving with an old, patriarchal resident one day, who, in speaking of the wonderful power which this kind of an atmosphere has for giving the effects of mirage, said, that, in the pioneer days, a man on a horse, well off under the horizon, would appear

very much like a ship in the distance.

As to atmospheric effects, it is interesting to compare various Southern and semi-tropical climates. For instance, the balmy air and lazy days of Southern Tennessee have a peculiar charm not easily forgotten; the mornings are so fresh and soft, the roses are laden so heavily with dew, the sun rises over the mountains so deliberately and genially, that the temptation to simply sit down and be happy is well nigh irresistible. Mr. ———, a gentleman who was in business in the South for some time, and whose home was in one of the most historic of spots, had a charming wife, whose

attitude on the question of climate and industry always seemed to me particularly logical. "When I was in the North," said she, "I was not lazy, and I tried to avoid being so here; but I have given up the fight, and now I enjoy being lazy, and feel in perfect harmony with my environment; so I am going to be satisfied, and I do not want to go back North; for, then, I should want to get over being lazy." It seems to me that some of the residents of the delightful South have, to a great extent, reached exactly this condition. You cannot make much money, as a young man once told me, but it is a good place to en-

joy life, and simply be happy with things as they are. This may not be thoroughly American; but, I dare say, it is, in a way, quite accurately Southern, and America is not measured in one direction only.

The cotton growers and manufacturers of the South have to contend, we know, with certain conditions of labor, which the white man, as yet, has not met very successfully. And, one of the most inconvenient characteristics of these conditions probably is, that the energy of the North, on finding itself in this Southern climate, refuses to continue, without great encouragement, its habitual exertions. Therefore,

some may reasonably be a little slow to think of making a home in a climate where industry, of the Northern type, is always threatening, with the best of people, to strike.

It is not very easy to realize, that, in the State of California, there are a number of private estates, the size of some of which is greater than the combined areas of a number of the Atlantic States. The owners of these wide areas are generally engaged in the cattle raising business, in connection with general agricultural interests; particularly such farming as would naturally be required, to conduct, profitably, large stock ranches. The capital

invested in some of these great plants is not always American. It would be interesting to know whether, on the whole, the great ranches are paying a good dividend, either actually, or such, in comparison with the smaller general farms and fruit places.

One cannot but feel that the time will come, none too soon, when the wheat ranchers, as they are now known, will become operators, or owners, of smaller general farms. These men who now raise wheat on farms, or ranches, as they are called here, ranging from several hundred to several thousand acres in size, seem to be losing, quite uniformly, large

amounts of money. As one recently told me, who is operating 5000 acres, "This is a gambling business; it is simply a matter of gambling on the weather." "I know," he continued, "that this is all there is to it, but it seems to be necessary." And, moreover, said he, the harder the times, and the more exacting the owners are in their terms, the more land one must operate in order to make expenses and something more; because, one can only make so much on a bushel of wheat, and to make more money one must have more bushels, which can be raised with the same number of mule teams and the same number of men, working harder,

or with nearly the same equipment. The land that we were riding over, during this conversation, is an excellent fruit soil; the gentleman himself said that it would some day be divided into little fruit farms, devoted to peach culture.

About the first thing that one is inclined to think of, with reference to California, is that nature seems to have been very chary of her rain fall. The people of Southern California would give almost anything, I imagine, if they could be quite sure of a generous number of rainy days. The ranchers of the wheat growing regions would, probably, not be able to farm the thousands of acres that they

handle now so easily, if there were as much rain fall as the East and Middle West are acquainted with. It seems to be one of the uniformities of nature that her compensations are just and certain. Owing to the fact that the climate is so dry in these wheat growing areas, the combined harvester takes the grain off

One of these highly useful machines cuts, thrashes and sacks the grain as it goes over the field, drawn by about thirty mules or horses. One man with one "jerk line" or, possibly, with two lines for greater safety, drives the long column that furnishes the motive power, another good man, by the exercise of great agility, sews the sacks as they are rapidly filled, and a third looks after the running of the machine. One of these modern cradles can cut in the neighborhood of forty acres, in a day of twelve hours. A single "swath," is eighteen feet wide, the number of sacks piled on the stubble, about four hundred, and the bushels of wheat ready for market, one thousand. For the machine that makes these things possible, the rancher, or one of his neighbors, pays \$1,650. And it seems to be worth while, either to own or to hire one. The broad tire expanse of the gigantic main wheel is

the stalk, and leaves it in piles of sacks, regularly distributed over the stubble field, ready for the mule teams and great wagons. The Eastern farmer could do nothing of the sort. His grain is not fit to thrash when it is on the stalk, and he could not thrash it to advantage, if he wanted to; although, if he lets it stand too long it shells out. Therefore, he goes through several operations, at the cost of much time and labor, arriving, some weeks or months later, at the same end as the California rancher. It would, therefore, be sur-

equipped, in later years, with teeth so long that, when the powerful breaks are set, even thirty excited mules would be wasting their time in trying to run away.

prising if he were to attempt to cultivate any such number of acres, as is possible where twelve mule plows, following one another in numbers, plowing the land and planting the grain at the same time, leave nothing further to be done until the following summer, when the combined harvester, with the mule teams and wagons, put the crop in the warehouse and aboard the cars in a trice.

Speaking of mule teams, it might be interesting to an Eastern farmer to see how several thousand acres are turned over, regularly, every season, by each of the hundreds of ranchers, with no more difficulty than farmers in other sections

have, in plowing a very few hundred acres, or less. There are no snow banks here to cover the fertile, soft fields during the winter months, and, as soon as the fall rains begin, the rancher can set his gang plows behind his twelve mule teams and not take them out of the ground, as it were, until his wide acres are ready to leave for the harvester, the coming summer. The men that drive these teams have no very difficult task, and receive good wages; which, however, they are said to spend in a questionable way with a lamentable thoroughness and regularity. The laboring classes seem, in the agricultural districts, at least, not to

have reached that industrial period yet, where the value of money is appreciated the way it is in the older Eastern localities.

You know, Aunt Alice and Uncle Frank, that you have sometimes been relieved of my letters for even days at a time. Kindly use some of these saved moments in trying to overlook the serious inroad upon your leisure, caused by the above, through the unfortunate regard of

Your affectionate

NEPHEW.

HOME, May 6, 1903.

MY DEAR COUSIN EDITH,—

Why are you not around to go with one, now and then? When are you coming out? "What first impressed me when I came?" Perhaps you will say, "How odd." It was the trip across the Bay, and the gulls.

If, in the winter season, one go, for the first time, to San Francisco, by way of one of the large ferry boats that cross over from the Oakland pier, the great number of sea gulls that accompany the boat from

one side of San Francisco bay to the other, may give the observer a novel and pleasing surprise. They are very interesting creatures, and it seems about as hard for them to fly as it does for a duck to swim; the matter of getting tired does not appear to be one of their troubles; they all have very good appetites, and it seems too bad that something to eat does not oftener come in their way. If a mouthful of anything goes overboard, it matters not much what, all the gulls on that side of the boat immediately give their attention to getting that one mouthful, or, rather, making the attempt to get it. The gull that is successful, at once

chooses to be alone, in the same way that a chicken or a turkey, upon finding something edible, or even unedible, makes off with it, and is at once followed vigorously by all his companions. The note of the gull is a plaintive, light cry, which, when repeated by many voices, becomes a matter of high pitch.

The wind blows sometimes in San Francisco. It is a good place to really find out how much the same any wind is, most anywhere, whether on the New England coast, off the shores of Lake Michigan, over the prairies of the Middle West, or down Market street, San Francisco. If there is any difference, I think, perhaps,

the ladies use slightly longer hat pins, and the men wear their hats a trifle smaller in the Golden Gate City than elsewhere. People who are not good friends of a stiff breeze will find trouble in living harmoniously in this city. Those lovers of the quiet, balmy air, where not a leaf stirs, or where it is quite an event to see a little jostle in the tree tops, should hie themselves to the Southland. Of course, the normal sea breeze is expected about seaports, and San Francisco Bay is no exception, especially in the summer. People should find it a convenience to live in the vicinity of the Bay, because there are good reasons for not packing

away winter furs for the summer time, and, now and then, one is very likely to need an August wardrobe in January. In this respect it is an accommodating climate. One cannot get far out of the way by taking an overcoat in the morning any month in the year; and, if one chances to forget it, there is not the likelihood of presenting a lonely appearance; for, lawn dresses, furs, light overcoats, heavy suits, straw hats, and the like, are all on very intimate terms on the street, most any day; aboard the ferry it is true from one end of the calendar to the other.

It would seem to me, Edith, that the summer is

a very dangerous season in the East; it would be an appropriate time for you to visit California. While earthquakes are very suggestive natural phenomena of what might happen, the record of cyclones for what has happened is a much more pertinent consideration. These, and other things, are believed to be true by one who remains,

Affectionately your
COUSIN.

HOME, May 9, 1903.

DEAR BEATRICE,—I suppose that I am always writing about something which my Uncle Charles would consider to be of distinctly no importance.. But how is this to be avoided? Things of so called consequence remind one of business, or, what is worse, may lead to serious moments, in which there is every certainty of saying something in earnest, and the saying of earnest things is so questionable. Thus, is desire driven back to the safe

things, away from human hopes and questions.

If one go out along Valley View street and turn to the right after crossing Manor House Bridge, there appears, just ahead the opening to that portion of Horseshoe Creek Drive which lies toward the Sierras and El Capitan Road. After crossing the space immediately in front of the House yard, one's attention is taken by the attractive little sketch on the road-side at the left. There are about a dozen locust trees stretched along, in a broken, slightly curved outline, and at their bases, in the winter season, is a strip of the finest California green, sprinkled over with the fallen locust leaves,

now brown and sere, near two months past. The tree trunks are not large, and from their tapering bodies far into the branches the climate has aided the tiny lichen plants, or fungus growths, to paint the bark in rich, old lemon browns and yellows. As the mellow afternoon sun comes down through the naked branches on to the green beneath, the modest width of which lies between the road and the grass-choked fence, itself covered very thickly with lichen browns and yellowish greens, one recognizes a simple picture, but the sight of it is a quick and lasting joy. The memory of it haunts one in passing further along the drive

way, looking down its graceful lines, and through its charmingly gilded tree tops, on and out into the warmer haze of the Valley, or off to the left on the solid soft blue of the lower Sierras, whose stern white peaks and summits hold the season for one; for, after all, it is winter, the time when the woodland scene that is green has an added charm and vigor.

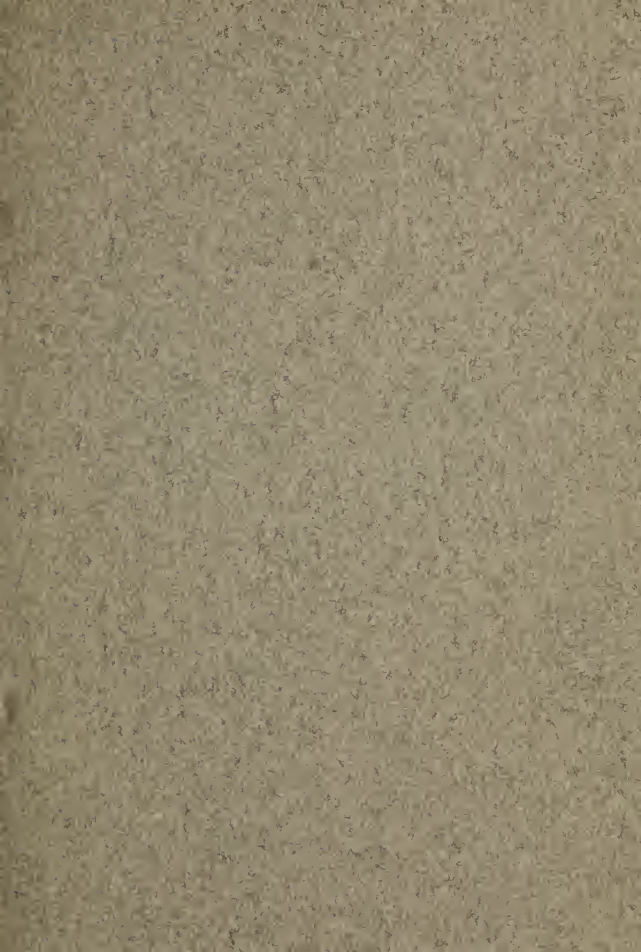
So, one stands, to the shoe top, in the thick, soft green, with the water of a near-by stream gurgling merrily along, the finches chattering busily overhead, and a sense of deep thankfulness withal for the land where Summer and Winter unite, and the heart, not

being chilled by the vigor of one or stupefied by the intensity of the other, is made glad by both. And, more than this, the charming thing is not easily forgotten; even if is small and of no repute. The memory of the fine thing is worth something. It abides with one and the joy of it in after days is a light to one's pathway. The image of it remains strong and constant through sorrows and lesser joys. It does not become angry or lose patience with us like our fellows are wont to do; even if we know that we have done wrong and are yet scarcely penitent for it, the fine thing censures not, but remains firm and beautiful, and waits for

us to come to true repentance; when this is accomplished it becomes to us a carrier of hope and a promise of brighter days. We are friends again with our own to take up life afresh in a new day. And as the fine and beautiful thing tells us these things we are grateful to it for the confidence which it gives us in ourselves, and in the future.

And because of these and like things, Beatrice, it will ever be impossible to remain less than

Faithfully yours,



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